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THE  
PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW.

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ON THE MEANING OF TRUTH.<sup>1</sup>

THE philosopher labors under a difficulty which is not felt in the several sciences: the terms which he employs, at least when any of the larger and more interesting problems are in question, are, almost without exception, what Matthew Arnold calls 'literary' terms. They have no single determinate meaning. They cover a variety of meanings which imperceptibly shade into one another. They are like living things, and in the actual business of intellectual intercourse they have a bland and genial way of adapting themselves to the company they keep. This is one reason why philosophical discussions are in their unique way so humanly interesting, and also one reason why they are apparently so interminable. We are forced to speak the language of the market-place, which means we must use terms that lack precision. Since every one uses these terms, every one understands them, — until he is brought to book and asked to define his meaning. Then he finds it well nigh impossible so to define his meaning as to make it include all he intends the term to cover without at the same time including a great deal more. Truth is just such a term. We all use it, and all know what it means, until we try to make that meaning definite and explicit. Then even those who should be experts are non-plussed.

The first answer that one is tempted to make to "jesting Pilate's" question is the sophists' answer: "There are truths many, and no lack of definitions of them." But if a Socratic gad-fly is on hand to rouse us from our sluggishness by urging: "But

<sup>1</sup> Read as part of the 'discussion' of this subject at the Cornell meeting of the American Philosophical Association, December 28, 1907.

do truths differ as truths because there are many of them, or not rather from some other quality? Is there not some common definition of them all?" — then we can no longer rest content until we have succeeded, to our own satisfaction at least, in framing a definition which will include all the special cases, doing full justice to each, even to those where in popular usage 'to be true' is apparently equivalent to 'to be loyal,' and to those where truth is used as the antithesis of the lie.

We might pause a moment on the threshold to point out certain things about truth regarding which it would seem as if we ought all speedily to reach agreement. They are matters so obvious that my only excuse for mentioning them is the fact that, in recent discussions, they have been brought to the fore with a great flourish of trumpets as if their recognition constituted in some way the distinctive achievement, and the special recommendation, of a particular philosophical sect that has lately come into prominence. Surely we can all agree, when we are satisfied to speak in a large and loose way, that "true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify"; that our notion of truth is "bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to"; that a true theory is a theory that will work, and that its working means that "it must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences"; that it is in the long run the expedient way of thinking; that in getting truth we always start with experience, and to experience must ever keep returning; that truth does not hang in the air, an inert static relation, but that it lives in actual experience.<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, too, we all do agree in using the word 'concrete' as an adjective of approval in describing our own view, while condemning all the views of our opponents as more or less 'abstract.' And surely we can all join the choir of the pragmatists, and with them sing the praises of truth and its practical value. Have we not all of us, when the philistines have scornfully described us as mere theorists indulging in idle speculation, met their accusation by trying to show, what we all devoutly believe, that our pursuit is

<sup>1</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 201, 216, *et passim*.

in the best sense of the word practical, and that the truth which we seek has a value for the daily business of life.

The issue, in so far as there is an issue between us, would be more sharply defined if we would only, once for all, take these things for granted, and turn to the root of the matter. Now, passing by the difficulty involved in the attempt to define truth in terms of the expedient, — a matter which I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> — what I find it most impossible to accept in the so-called ‘new’ view is the doctrine that Mr. Schiller expresses when he says that “the truth of an assertion depends upon its verification,” or that Professor James expresses when he writes: “Truth happens to an idea. . . . Its verity is an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself.” That the psychological experience of truth-getting is the experience of a verifying process is true enough, — tautological even, — but this tells us nothing of the nature of the truth that is so got. As a matter of fact, it is to the structure of experience, and that means the structure of things and the structure of minds as well, that I turn for confirmation or refutation of my ideas. But in doing so I am necessarily taking it for granted that my ideas are, in advance of such processes of confirmation or refutation, either true or false. For example, I may have inferred from certain lines on Mars that they indicate the presence of canals, and therefore of inhabitants, and I may thereupon assert that Mars is inhabited. This is either true or false now, though no one has yet experienced the verifying process. It may be said that this is so obvious that no one ever thought of denying it, and yet its denial is clearly involved in the attempt to identify truth with the verifying process, and is expressly stated in some of the writings of the pragmatists. There is a striking passage in Professor James’s *Pragmatism*, and one cannot but regret that he did not keep it definitely in view throughout his discussion of truth. It should certainly lead him to temper his strictures on “intellectualism,” and, I think, to modify his own account of truth. He writes: “When new experiences lead to retrospective judgments, using the past tense, what these judgments utter *was* true, even though no past thinker had been led there.”<sup>2</sup> Surely

<sup>1</sup>This journal, November, 1907, p. 632; and article, “Latter-day Flowing Philosophy,” in *University of California Publications, Philosophy*, Vol. I.

<sup>2</sup>*Pragmatism*, p. 223.

this is a recognition of truth as meaning a relation that obtains prior to the process of truth-getting, and it is enough to admit the entering wedge for all the intellectualism you please.

Now the idealist, like his first cousin the realist, starts from, and emphasizes, perhaps at times over-emphasizes, the objective side of truth; the pragmatist starts from, and emphasizes, and I think over-emphasizes, the subjective side.

It is a fundamental error to take the agreement formula, the notion that true ideas are those that copy or agree with reality, as the original, natural, instinctive, and obvious meaning of truth. Such a formula is, in fact, unintelligible until after the appearance of the sceptical individualism which would separate the knower from the world of reality which he seeks to know. The natural standpoint is far more object-minded. The history of science and of philosophy clearly shows this to be the case. Men sought after truth, knew what they meant, and were more or less successful in their search, long before they were sufficiently self-conscious and sufficiently sophisticated to understand what the agreement formula means. And we get much light on the nature and meaning of truth by going back to these earlier thinkers to see what it was they were actually after when they were seeking truth, and before they had ever thought to ask, What is truth? Now what they were after was the discovery of actual relations that obtained in the world of experience, and relations of such a kind as would enable them to tie together diverse experiences. *What* they sought was the hidden unity behind the manifest diversity of the world about them, the abiding substratum of changing things. In a word, they sought to anchor the passing experience, to give it a setting where it would stay put. Of course, they got into all sorts of difficulty when, in their simple innocence, they conceived unity as excluding variety, fixity as excluding change. But it is still natural for us all, whether students of philosophy or of science, to take truth in the first instance thus objectively as meaning the discovery of unity in experience, the discovery of the abiding reality of the world of changing things. Only we have been learning more and more, as the result of bitter experiences, to conceive of unity

and variety as correlative, permanence and change as correlative, and we are thereby enabled to avoid some of the pit-falls of the earlier thinkers. Abstract unity, and abstract permanence, and the other-worldly view of truth which they inspired, had sufficiently exhibited their futility twenty-four hundred years ago. None the less the prime intellectual need is still to find unity and permanence. How shall these be interpreted concretely? That is the problem. To conceive of truth as the discovery of the hidden harmony of all things, as the discovery of the universal reign of law, as the discovery of the single thread of meaning that runs through all things and guides all things,—these are some of the ways in which early thinkers sought a solution of this problem. When, however, philosophy had once reached the full stature of self-consciousness in the discovery that man inevitably measures all things for himself, and by standards that are his own ways of thinking, it became henceforth obvious that the reality which is the object of truth must be conceived anthropocentrically and teleologically, or, if you prefer, humanistically and in the light of purpose. Herewith we are thrown back on our original quest, which must now be taken up afresh, for this Protagorean insight seems to be the triumph of the many at the cost of the loss of the one, and to leave us with truth hanging in the air, subjective and unstable. In the presence of this situation, and in order to save truth from being lost in the anarchy of opinions which such a doctrine seems to threaten, one is then prone, and if his temperament be poetical or religious this proneness is particularly pronounced, forthwith to project the *anthropos* who shall be the only genuine measurer of truth up into the clouds, to view him as the man in the heavens, and as also the man in men; and at the same time to conceive of the purpose or *telos* as the object of a universal will. But while this conception may have its value to the poet and the saint, for purposes of praying and dreaming and writing poetry, how can it be of any service in the drudgery of prosaic life? Is not this just an attempt to “bury our heads in the sand of heavenly things”? Is it not simply re-introducing the old barren notion of abstract unity and permanence? For one cannot,

of course, take one's own standpoint to be that of the absolute knower of all truth, and seek to determine how things actually are by determining how it is best for them to be. But one has a second string to one's bow. That conception of a universal mind may remain the inspiration of the thinker as well as of the saint, but we are forced none the less modestly to begin where we now are, with just the experiential situation in which we now find ourselves, and proceed to make good our slow steps in the direction of that desired goal. At the same time, the form which that progress takes is determined by that ideal. For, take any object, any bit of experience whatsoever; if your judgments about it are clear and definite and coherent one with another, if, moreover, they are of such a kind as to enable you to read the meaning of this object so that it shall define, and in turn be defined by, all other objects of the same order, if, finally, they enable you to put this bit of experience in its larger time context as well, to view it in the light of its genesis and probable destiny, — then, and in so far, your judgments concerning it are true.

Truth is always conceiving a particular object in the light of its 'idea,' its concrete universal, that is to say, simply conceiving it in its total context or setting. This it is that gives the unity and permanence that thought is after; and it will be observed that this is a unity and permanence that lives in and through variety and change. This is the broad conception of truth.

Truth is not a copy of reality. Truth is in question just as much where we are dealing with unrealities as where we are dealing with realities. Centaurs are unreal. Yet for all that it is true that Cheiron was a centaur, and it is true that he carried Achilles on his back and fed him on bear's marrow. Otherwise Achilles would not be Achilles, and Homer would not be Homer. So I can tell the truth about my castles in Spain. Again, it is a matter of congruity and coherence and of finding the context within which the object gets defined. But of course the conception of Cheiron is incongruous with the prosaic world of the anatomist. I cannot live in my castles in Spain, and, if I over-indulge in the habit of building them, I may find to my sorrow that I cannot live anywhere else, and chaos and unreason will be my doom.

Again, the scientist at work in his laboratory is always in search of the larger context for the specific fact or facts he is dealing with. He wants to read the particular experience in such a way as to have it throw light on all other experiences that fall within the chosen field of investigation, and have all the rest throw light upon it. He too is after vision in the light of the whole. Of course he doesn't reach his goal any more than the philosopher does his, but he is all the while getting truth just in proportion to his success in discovering the larger unity of experience within which the particular facts from which he sets out acquire their own determinate meaning. Every case of getting truth, if we describe it objectively, and not from the standpoint of the private emotions of the successful truth seeker, consists in the discovery of the significance of some object in the focus of consciousness when that object is conceived in its context, in its relations to other objects of actual or possible or imagined experience. Focusing attention isolates the individual object of interest; thought restores the object to the larger context to which it belongs and through which its own meaning and reality get defined. The ideally completed knowledge would thus be, not the discovery of some far off heaven of eternal truth which resembled the dull monotonous abode of the Epicurean gods,

Where never creeps a cloud or moves a wind,  
Nor ever sound of human sorrow mounts to mar  
Their sacred everlasting calm,

but rather simply this : the ability to read each momentary fact of experience as it comes along in its absolutely total experiential context, such a context being the one in which no item of actual or possible experience is left out.

The implication underlying this view is that the particular object of experience has its place in that complete context, and it is just such a context that we mean when we speak of a realm of experience. When one appeals to experience as the test and control of truth, it is experience in this transcendent sense that is meant. It is clearly not my experience, nor the sum of all of our experiences that is meant, for it must also include all possible experiences, and all experiences that



once were but no longer are possible experiences. Now what I understand idealism to mean is that this total experiential context is real, and is what we mean by reality objectively considered, and that it gets its reality vouched for by the fact that it lives in every experience, being just the setting that is necessary to give the particular item of experience its own significance. At the same time, experience thus viewed clearly is not, nor ever could be, an experienced fact; for, as experienced fact, it would have to be all here and now, and all mine, or thine, whereas the experience which one means, when one appeals to experience for the control of truth and the definition of reality, transcends all such limitations. In other words, the concept of experience is itself transcendent of experience, and in the nature of the case could admit of no empirical verification. It is transcendent of my present conscious experience, and of the sum of all my experiences, and also of the sum of all the experiences of my fellow men, and of the whole human race, for it includes, as equally real with consciously experienced facts, and as continuous with them, all that befell on this planet, for example, before conscious life existed, and all that has happened since, or is happening now, but which falls, or has fallen, within no man's actual experience. And this conception of experience is not peculiar to the so-called 'intellectualists.' I think even the pragmatists keep using it even while they are abusing the rest of us for doing so. When, for instance, Professor Dewey says that "reality as such is an entire situation," is not this "entire situation" just another name for the same conception? For in every case the entire situation would carry one far beyond the limits of the present momentary conscious experience.

In view of what we now have before us, we may then define truth as grasping the transient fact in its transcendent context.

But perhaps the objection will be raised that I have been discussing not truth but reality. I shall be reminded that those philosophers and scientists who engaged in this quest after what I have been calling truth viewed their quest as the search after the really real, after being as such. And, it will be said, truth is not a characteristic of reality but of ideas, conceptions, judgments.

The dispute as to whether truth is one with reality is in part a matter of words. The fact is, reality is just as ambiguous a word as truth. If reality be regarded as equivalent to objects of experience taken just at their face value, precisely as they are immediately experienced, then indeed truth and reality will be far from being identical. And, again, if reality be regarded as consisting of a world of things-in-themselves, the two terms will be even wider apart. But if one is led to view reality as constituting a realm of experience which is a whole made up of parts which are inter-related in such a way that any one part, when seen as it is, shall be fraught with the meaning of all the rest, and if one therefore regards any item of experience as having its own reality fixed and determined in that context, then the terms come much closer together. Yet even so there is an important distinction which would seem to be lost sight of in making this identification. For the judgments and conceptions which state the true meaning of the facts should be distinguished from the facts whose true meaning is in them reported, even from an absolute point of view.

But I have so far been viewing truth in what some may think too objective a fashion. And I have left out some most important considerations, to which I shall turn presently. None the less, what those early thinkers described as the search for the real, or for being as such, is just what we mean when we, being ontologically more modest, use as common sense does the phrase 'search after truth,' or when we speak of the scientist as a truth seeker. Our natural standpoint is thus objective, and other views of truth are more sophisticated, and are grafted upon this earlier view. In seeking truth the self is effaced, ignored, forgotten, and one is wholly absorbed in the object and its relations.

Now the scientist may, and the epistemologist must note that when truth in this sense is discovered the result is no mere affair of immediate perception. Nor is the truth objective in the sense that the individual who finds it has succeeded in actually leaving himself behind. The initial datum has, in becoming a definite and significant object, been transformed, been 'translated,' in Pearson's

phrase, into conceptions, and, we should also add, into judgments, which are conceptions whose meaning has been made explicit. From this standpoint, truth will undoubtedly be primarily a certain property of our conceptions and judgments. And it is here that the notion of 'copying' and of 'agreement' comes in, a notion that is quite as inaccurate, quite as misleading, quite as metaphorical, as is the mirror notion as applied to self-consciousness.

The individual truth-seeker, if he should stop in the midst of his quest to say: "After all, these conceptions and judgments are merely mine; I wonder whether they agree with or copy reality," would certainly not get very far. He is not troubled with any doubt as to whether in seeing he is seeing the thing as others would see it, whether in judging he is judging as others would judge. All that he takes as a matter of course, and so he confidently expects that the judgments which are true for him are true for any other intelligent person confronting the same experience precisely in so far as they can be regarded as *true* for him. But if he is led to reflect that after all truth is in question only when the meaning of experienced fact is expressed in ideas, conceptions, or judgments, and that these are always ideas, conceptions, or judgments which I or some other individual has, are affairs of consciousness; whereas they purport to describe seemingly outer fact, a common realm of experience, — he may then indeed doubt his instinctive confidence. But the doubt is apt to be quashed almost immediately by the copy metaphor. On its surface that seems an easy way out. My judgments are true when they represent, copy, agree with reality.

But the difficulty of making such 'copying' intelligible, when the real which is to be copied is conceived realistically, is notorious, and I need not dwell upon it here. The pragmatist has recently, however, sought to pour new wine into these old bottles. Has he made the matter any clearer? To agree with reality, says Professor James, means "to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed." But look at this assertion more

closely. I may be supposed to understand what I mean when I say I agree with you, or when I say that my solution of this problem agrees with yours. But suppose I go on to interpret my meaning by saying, by agreeing with you I mean that I am guided either straight up to you or into your surroundings, or am put into such working touch with you as to handle either you or something connected with you better than if we disagreed. Well, it sounds just as strange if we apply this interpretation to agreement when referring to two solutions of the same problem. If there is one thing that such an attempt does make clear it is that the agreement formula is a clumsy figure of speech. It does not definitely express any intelligible account of the truth relation.

The puzzle which we are here concerned with is the one that arises from the reflection that the judgments one makes are one's own, and, at the same time, as true, purport to have objective validity. Now if the truth seeker, who has not been misled by epistemological subtleties, has any doubt as to his success in getting truth, it is clear that what he doubts is not whether his judgments agree with or copy reality, but rather whether they do or do not successfully read the meaning of this particular fact or group of facts before him in the light of their total experiential context, or of so much of it as is marked off for him by the point of view which has determined the boundaries of his chosen field of work. This would be for him the entire situation. This is clear, I say, for if he wants to assure himself that his judgments are true what does he do? He certainly does not try to match up his judgments with outer reality, to find a one-for-one correspondence between them. No, he simply seeks more precise instruments of observation, takes his object from different angles, goes over the steps of his reasoning, to see whether or not in translating the percepts into concepts he has succeeded in getting that fact in just its setting.

But there is also another way in which one may test his results. He may make appeal to another observer, get some one else to stand in his shoes, view the same fact, use his instruments and method, and then wait for his verdict to see whether the con-

ceptions and judgments of another agree with his own. The investigator always takes it for granted that his seeing is typical, his thinking is typical. The inevitable personal equation, the influence of temperament, and the like,—these are imperfections in the instrument that may be compensated. And it is this conception of the typical that, I think, gives the copy theory its plausibility. It is not I, John Smith, that reach these results, but I as a rational observer of a common order of experience. Well, then, if this be so, my fellow worker will see and judge as I do. My truth will be his truth, will be all men's truth, truth for any intelligent observer of just this fact. And so the expression, "my conceptions and judgments are true because and in so far as they agree with reality," means simply that they are true in so far as they are free from the limitations of anything purely private and idiosyncratic in me. In so far as this is the case, they agree with the judgments and conceptions of the typical judge, of the wise man who absolutely knows, or with what such a judge, could he be found, would report. And since I cannot find this all-wise judge, I gain such assurance as I can from the agreement of my wise friends and fellow workers.

And if I mean by reality any experienced fact, as such a judge would describe it, I may say that truth and reality ultimately coincide. But inasmuch as even in such a case we should distinguish between reality as experienced and the accurate description thereof as expressed in judgments, the identification should not be made. One should reserve the word 'truth' to describe the quality which judgments have when they successfully report for thought the significance of the experienced fact or facts. And the mark of success here would be to lift the immediate fact out of its apparent, and, in so far as it is viewed as simply immediate fact, its real isolation into the transcendent context, into its place in the realm of experience.

But, as Professor James remarks, experience is shot through with unities. There is not one context, but many of them. And we can take a fact in one context, and regard its relations in all other contexts as irrelevant. True. But if the object has relations in those other contexts, while we may find it convenient for

certain purposes to ignore them, it is equally clear that we cannot discover the whole truth about the object in question until we conceive it also in those neglected contexts. Until we do so we are viewing the object under a partial aspect, are dealing with an abstraction, or, if you prefer, a sort of legal fiction about the fact, and not with the fact in its full concrete significance.

Again, these partial unities, and the kind of coherence which they reveal, depend upon the categories, that is, the points of view, from which the particular objects are regarded. It is thus, for example, that the fields of the several sciences get marked off from one another, biology from chemistry, and both of these from mathematics, etc. And these points of view determine the principles by means of which the desired unities are effected. But, if we are entitled to speak of a world of experience, it is clear that these various categories, and the points of view which they determine, must have their own organic interconnectedness. They are not just random, haphazard points of view. If they were, chaos so far as the world of experience is concerned, insanity so far as the knower is concerned, would be the result. Thus it is necessary to assume that these different points of view which guide us on the different levels of investigation have their place in the total context, or completed system, of such points of view. In other words, the conception of a realm of experience and the conception of an all-wise interpreter thereof are correlative terms.

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